

Simple Mornings

"You're the only thing I'm sure of

And it makes it all so hard

All the other things are broken out of focus."

Hong

The morning arrived gently, like it was apologizing for all the mornings before it that had come too fast and too loud.

I woke without an alarm for the first time in weeks. No jolt of panic, no immediate mental inventory of everything that needed to be done, no scramble for my phone to check what disaster had unfolded while I slept. Just... waking. The slow return to consciousness that felt more like floating to the surface of warm water than being dragged from the depths.

My room was soft with early light, the curtains doing their job of filtering the sun into something bearable. I could hear birds outside—actual birds, not the constant traffic noise that usually dominated the morning soundscape. For a long moment, I just lay there, existing in the particular peace of a body that had finally gotten enough rest.

Ten days until the exhibition.

The thought surfaced and then settled, not urgent, not demanding. Just information. The paintings were named. The catalog was ready. The logistics were handled. For the first time since this whole process began, I didn't have anything that absolutely needed to be done before noon.

I reached for my phone on the nightstand and unlocked it with the lazy familiarity of someone who had done this ten thousand times. Social media first—the mindless scroll that everyone pretended was bad for them but no one actually stopped doing. Instagram showed me art I would never make and places I would never visit. Twitter was doing its usual thing of being simultaneously entertaining and exhausting. I liked a few posts, saved a few references for later, and felt absolutely no guilt about wasting time.

This was what normal people did on their days off. This was what I was allowed to do now.

The clock read 7:52 AM when I finally set my phone down and stretched, feeling my spine pop in a way that was deeply satisfying. I could hear movement elsewhere in the house—my sister was already up, probably making breakfast or chasing after Gavin or both. The particular rhythm of a household waking, familiar and grounding.

I was considering whether I had the motivation to get out of bed when I heard it. Footsteps. Small ones. Running down the hallway with the particular thunder that only a four-year-old could produce—disproportionately loud for such a small body, absolutely certain that the world existed to be run through at full speed. A series of enthusiastic taps on my door, and then it burst open before I could respond.

"Uncle Hong!"

Kavin launched himself at my bed like a small, extremely energetic missile. I barely had time to brace myself before he was scrambling over the covers, limbs everywhere, giggling with the pure joy of someone who had just accomplished a very important mission.

"Good morning to you too." I managed, as he burrowed under my blankets and emerged triumphant, his hair sticking up in seventeen different directions.

"Mommy said you were sleeping but I wanted to wake you up! Are you awake now? You look awake. Hi!"

"Hi." I couldn't help but smile. There was something about Kavin's energy that was impossible to resist—it bypassed all my usual defenses and went straight to the part of me that remembered how to be happy without thinking about it. "I'm awake. Mostly."

He snuggled against my side, suddenly calm after his explosive entrance. That was Kavin—bursts of chaos followed by moments of unexpected stillness, like a hurricane that kept pausing to examine interesting rocks.

My sister appeared in the doorway, her hair disheveled, still in her robe, looking like someone who had been awake for exactly long enough to lose control of her child. "Good morning." she said simply, her voice carrying the particular exhaustion of parenthood. But there was warmth underneath it, the unspoken understanding that passed between siblings who had weathered their share of storms and come out the other side.

"Morning."

She nodded once and disappeared down the hallway, presumably to continue whatever breakfast preparation Kavin's mission had interrupted. I could hear her footsteps on the stairs, then the faint sounds of activity from the kitchen below—pots and pans, the refrigerator opening and closing, the particular music of a household in motion.

Kavin had decided that my pillow was more interesting than his usual morning energy required. He was lying beside me now, his small body radiating the particular heat that children seemed to generate, his fingers tracing patterns on the pillowcase.

"Uncle Hong?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you happy today?" The question caught me off guard. Children asked the strangest things, and somehow their questions always managed to be both completely simple and impossibly profound.

"Yeah," I said, considering it. "I think I am."

"Good." He nodded seriously, as if this was very important information that he would file away for future reference. "Mommy says when you're happy, your art is prettier."

I laughed—an actual laugh, the kind that surprised me with how easy it came. "Did she say that?"

"Mm-hmm. She said you've been working very hard and she hopes you're being nice to yourself."

My sister, communicating through her four-year-old messenger. It was such a her move—indirect but intentional, making sure I heard what she wanted to say without having to say it herself.

"Tell your mommy I'm being very nice to myself," I said. "And also that she should mind her own business."

Kavin giggled. "I can't say that. That's rude."

"You're right. Just tell her the first part."

Kavin had moved on from starfishing to examining my face with intense curiosity, his small hands patting my cheeks like he was checking for something.

"Your face is scratchy," he informed me.

"It's called stubble. It happens when you're old."

"Are you very old?"

"Ancient. Practically prehistoric."

His eyes went wide with what appeared to be genuine concern. "Like the dinosaurs?"

"Exactly like the dinosaurs. I'm basically a dinosaur wearing human skin."

Kavin burst into giggles at this, the sound bright and unrestrained, filling my small bedroom with the kind of joy that was impossible to manufacture. I found myself

smiling despite my best efforts to maintain a façade of dignified uncle-hood.

After a while, the smell of breakfast drifted up from the kitchen—something with eggs, maybe, and definitely toast. My stomach reminded me that I was, in fact, a person who required food, and Gavin seemed to sense the shift in my attention.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Starving."

"Me too! Let's go!"

He scrambled off the bed with renewed enthusiasm, waiting impatiently by the door while I threw back the covers and found my slippers. I reached down and scooped him up, settling him on my hip in the practiced motion of someone who had been doing this since he was small enough to fit in the crook of one arm.

"Onward to breakfast." I declared.

"Onward!" Gavin echoed, one small fist raised in triumph.

We descended the stairs together, Gavin's arms wrapped around my neck, his weight familiar and grounding. The kitchen was warm and bright, morning sun streaming through the windows, and my sister was at the stove doing something with eggs that smelled incredible.

"There are my boys," she said without turning around. "Gavin, did you wake up your uncle nicely?"

"Yes!"

"That is a generous interpretation of events," I said, setting Gavin down in his booster seat at the table. "He burst in like a tiny invasion force."

"I was enthusiastic!" Gavin protested.

"You were very enthusiastic."

My sister laughed, sliding scrambled eggs onto plates with the efficiency of someone who had done this a thousand times. Toast appeared, buttered and cut into triangles the way Gavin liked. A glass of orange juice materialized in front of me before I could ask for it.

We ate together, the three of us, in the particular peace of a morning without urgency. Gavin chattered about his friends at kindergarten and the caterpillar they were watching turn into a butterfly and the very important question of whether robots could feel sad. My sister and I exchanged amused glances over his head, contributing to the conversation with the appropriate level of seriousness. This was family. Not perfect—never perfect—but real. Present. The kind of thing I'd spent too

many years taking for granted and was only now learning to appreciate.

After breakfast, the morning shifted into its practical phase.

My sister disappeared upstairs to shower and transform herself from "exhausted parent" to "functioning professional," leaving me to entertain Kavin while he finished his juice and contemplated the very serious question of what to wear to kindergarten.

"The dinosaur shirt," he decided eventually. "Because today is Tuesday and Tuesday is dinosaur day."

"Is it?"

"I decided. That makes it true."

I couldn't argue with that logic.

While my sister handled Kavin's outfit and the general chaos of getting a four-year-old ready for the world, I retreated to my own room to prepare for the day. The shower was brief—warm enough to be pleasant, quick enough to honor the shared hot water—and I emerged feeling more human than I had in days.

My closet offered its usual options. I reached for something comfortable but put-together—a gray plaid button-up shirt that I liked the weight of, black jeans that fit well without trying too hard. Underneath, a black tank top because layering was a habit I'd never broken and because Bangkok's weather couldn't be trusted to stay consistent.

I checked my reflection in the mirror, assessing. Acceptable. Maybe even good—my hair was cooperating today, falling in that artfully messy way that usually required effort but had apparently decided to happen naturally.

Rings next. Silver, mostly—three on my right hand, one on my left. They'd become part of my aesthetic without me quite deciding they should be, the kind of accessories that felt like extensions of myself rather than additions. A quick spray of cologne—something light, woody, the kind of scent that announced your presence without demanding attention, something subtle that Nut had mentioned he liked.

My backpack got its usual inventory: laptop, sketchbook, pencils, phone charger, wallet, keys. The essentials for a day that would include both relaxation and obligation. My afternoon class wasn't until 2 PM, which meant the morning stretched out ahead of me like a gift. I'd already decided where I was going. Or rather, the decision had made itself, the way it always did now when I had free time. There was a nineteen-year-old with a stuffed animal collection and an unlimited supply of cookies who had become, somehow, the person I most wanted to see.

I checked my phone. No messages yet, but it was still early. I typed quickly:

On my way. Are you awake?

The response came almost immediately—a series of emojis that I'd learned to translate as "yes, and I'm excited about it." A sunrise, a cookie, a heart, something that might have been a rabbit or possibly a very round dog.

I smiled at my phone like an idiot and headed downstairs.

Outside, the morning had committed to being beautiful. The sky was that particular shade of blue that Bangkok rarely achieved—clear and bright, unmarred by the usual haze of traffic and industry. My sister's car was parked in front of the house, and she was standing beside it in her work clothes, putting on earrings with the practiced multitasking of someone who was always running slightly behind schedule.

"You're heading out?" she asked, watching me emerge from the front door.

"Going to see a friend. Then class this afternoon."

"The friend with the stuffed animals?"

I blinked at her. "How do you know about that?"

"You talk about him a lot." She smiled, the knowing smile of an older sister who had been observing her sibling's social patterns for decades. "Lego, right? The one who makes the cookies."

"I don't talk about him that much."

"Hong." She finished with her earrings and turned to face me fully. "You mentioned him four times at dinner last week. You brought home muffins with little faces on them. You have a picture of a rabbit named Mr. Whiskers saved on your phone."

"That's... those are all separate things."

"They're all Lego things." Her smile softened. "I'm glad you have people. Real people, I mean. The kind you actually spend time with instead of just texting."

I didn't know what to say to that. The acknowledgment of my social growth felt both accurate and slightly embarrassing—like having someone notice that you'd finally learned to tie your shoes properly.

"Anyway." She picked up her bag from where she'd set it on the car hood. "Kavin needs to be at kindergarten by 8:30. Can you take him? I'm already running late for a meeting."

"Of course."

"Thank you." She leaned in and kissed my cheek quickly, a gesture of affection that

had become more common between us in recent years. "Have a good day. Be nice to yourself. Your art is prettier when you're happy."

"Kavin already told me."

"Good. Then it's official."

She got in her car and pulled away with a wave, leaving me standing in the morning sunlight with the particular warmth of family lingering in my chest. Kavin was in the small backyard, I realized—the gate that led there was open, and I could hear his voice carrying through the air. I walked around the side of the house and found him crouched among the plants, examining something with intense concentration.

"What did you find?" I asked, joining him at his level.

"A snail!" He pointed triumphantly at a small shell making its patient way across a leaf. "Look, Uncle Hong, it's carrying its house!"

"That's pretty smart," I said. "Having your house with you wherever you go."

"I wish I could do that." Kavin considered the snail with the seriousness it deserved. "Then I could live at the beach and the playground."

"That would be convenient."

"Very convenient."

I let him watch the snail for another minute, the two of us crouched in the garden together, before gently redirecting toward the task at hand.

"We need to go to school now," I said. "Say goodbye to the snail."

"Bye, snail! Have a good day! Be nice to yourself!"

I laughed as he straightened up and took my hand. My sister's advice, filtering through another generation, becoming a benediction for garden creatures.

The walk to Kavin's kindergarten was short—only a few blocks, through streets that were just beginning to fill with the day's activity. He held my hand the whole way, chattering about everything and nothing, his free hand occasionally pointing at things that demanded acknowledgment.

"Look, a cat!"

"Look, a very big car!"

"Look, that cloud looks like a dinosaur!"

I looked at all of them. Agreed about the cat. Confirmed the car's size. Squinted at

the cloud and decided it looked more like a potato, but kept this observation to myself. At the kindergarten gates, Kevin's energy shifted from excited-to-be-with-me to excited-to-see-his-friends. He spotted someone across the playground and his whole body vibrated with the need to be over there immediately.

I crouched down to his level, and he threw his arms around my neck in a fierce, brief hug—the kind of hug that children gave, without reservation or self-consciousness.

"Have a good day, Uncle Hong!"

"Have a good day, Kevin. Learn things. Be kind."

"I will!"

And then he was off, running through the gates with his dinosaur shirt and his complete certainty that the world was a wonderful place full of friends and markers and caterpillars becoming butterflies. I watched him go until he disappeared into the building, swept up by teachers and classmates, just another small person in a sea of small people learning to be big. I stood there for a moment longer than necessary, letting the warmth of the morning settle around me.

This was what life looked like when you weren't constantly running from something. When you had people you loved and people who loved you. When the exhibitions and the deadlines and the complicated questions about identity and belonging faded into the background, leaving only this: a clear morning, a child who thought clouds looked like dinosaurs, the simple joy of being exactly where you were supposed to be.

I pulled out my phone and sent another message to Lego:

Just dropped Kevin off. Heading to you now.

The response was another burst of emojis—this time including a cake, a party hat, and what appeared to be a disco ball. I had no idea what the disco ball meant, but I was looking forward to finding out.

The bus ride to Lego's apartment was familiar now.

I'd made this trip often enough that my body knew when to stand, when to prepare for transfers, when to watch for the stop that meant I was almost there. The route had become part of my mental map of the city—one of the places I went, one of the destinations that mattered. Through the window, Bangkok scrolled by in its usual chaos. Morning traffic. Street vendors setting up. The particular energy of a city that never really slept but sometimes pretended to take a nap. I watched it all pass with the comfortable detachment of someone who wasn't in a hurry, wasn't going anywhere that required urgency.

My phone buzzed.

Nut: Good morning! How's your day starting?

I smiled at the screen, that now-familiar warmth spreading through my chest.

Me: Good. Really good, actually. Spent the morning with my nephew. Now on my way to see Lego.

Nut: That sounds perfect. You deserve relaxation.

Me: I'm learning that.

Nut: Proud of you. Text me later?

Me: Always.

I put my phone away feeling lighter than I had when I picked it up. This was new—this having someone who checked in, who wanted to know about my day, who said things like "proud of you" like they were obvious truths rather than revelations. I was still getting used to it. Still waiting, sometimes, for the other shoe to drop. But the shoe remained stubbornly airborne, and every day that passed without it falling made me believe, just a little more, that maybe it never would.

Lego's building appeared through the window, and I stood to request my stop.

The elevator was the same as always—slightly too slow, slightly too bright, with a mirror that showed me a version of myself I was learning to recognize. Not the guarded, careful person I'd been for so long. Someone more relaxed. Someone who was on their way to see a friend, for no other reason than because they wanted to. The doors opened on Lego's floor, and I stepped out into the hallway—

And found him already there.

Lego was standing outside his apartment door, holding a cardboard box that seemed almost too large for his frame. His hair was damp, almost reaching his shoulders now, with bangs that were shorter than I remembered—freshly cut, maybe, or just styled differently. He was wearing the kind of outfit that would look costume-like on anyone else but somehow looked perfectly natural on him: very short shorts—very short, the kind that made me briefly wonder if they qualified as shorts at all—and a loose black t-shirt that hung off one shoulder, the fabric printed with rainbow lettering that spelled out "Freedom is Pride."

And on one knee, a compression brace. My attention caught on it immediately.

"Hong!" His face lit up when he saw me, that sunshine smile that seemed to generate its own warmth. "Perfect timing! Help me with the door?"

I moved forward automatically, taking the box from his arms so he could fish out his keys. The cardboard was lighter than I expected—not heavy, just awkward.

"What's this?"

"Present." He said it simply, but something in his voice was complicated. "From my dad."

The door swung open, and the familiar chaos of Lego's apartment enveloped us. Stuffed animals on every surface. Plants cascading from shelves. The particular scent of flowers and baking and the countless small things that made this space so distinctly him.

I set the box down on the table next to his computer, carefully navigating around a colony of Care Bears who seemed to be having a meeting. When I turned around, Lego was right there, and before I could say anything, he wrapped his arms around me.

Not a greeting hug. Something more. His face pressed against my shoulder, his whole body leaning into me like he needed something solid to hold onto. And then the sound. The unmistakable hitch of breathing that meant he was crying.

"Hey." I wrapped my arms around him instinctively, one hand coming up to rest on the back of his head. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"I'm tired." The word came out muffled against my shirt, frustrated and small. "I'm so tired, Hong. Everything is so much all the time and I just want to sleep for a year but I can't because there's too much to do and I know it's good stuff but it's still exhausting and—" His voice cracked, and he didn't finish the sentence. Just stayed there, pressed against me, letting himself be held.

I didn't say anything. Didn't try to fix it or offer advice or tell him it would be okay. Just stood there, solid and present, the way Lego had stood there for me when I'd needed someone to not have answers.

After a minute, maybe two, his breathing steadied. He pulled back slightly, wiping at his eyes with the back of his hand, his smile already reasserting itself despite the tears still tracking down his cheeks.

"Sorry. That was—I didn't mean to—"

"Don't apologize." I kept one hand on his shoulder, grounding. "You're allowed to be tired. You're allowed to cry about it."

"I know. I just—" He sniffed. "It's been a lot. The showcase, and work, and everything, and I'm fine, I am, but sometimes 'fine' is exhausting too, you know?"

I knew. I knew exactly.

My eyes went to the knee brace again, and something in my expression must have shown concern, because Lego followed my gaze and immediately waved a

dismissive hand.

"Your knee?" My voice came out sharper than I intended, worry spiking through me. "What happened to your knee?"

"Oh, this? It's nothing. Just prevention. The choreography is hard on my knees and I'm trying not to hurt myself before the actual performance." He attempted a smile. "See? Being responsible. Tui would be so proud."

"Are you sure it's just prevention? Because if you're hurt—"

"I'm fine." He looked at me with those eyes that always saw too much, and his expression softened. "Really. It's just soreness from practice. The brace helps. The physiotherapist said it was a good idea."

I wanted to push harder, wanted to demand more details, wanted to wrap him in bubble wrap and forbid him from ever dancing again if it meant he wouldn't get hurt. But I could see in his face that he didn't need that. He needed someone to trust him. To believe that he knew his own body.

"Okay," I said. "But you'll tell me if it gets worse?"

"I'll tell you if it gets worse."

"I'm not hurt. I promise." He held up one hand in a solemn gesture. "Cross my heart. The brace is just insurance. My teacher suggested it after she saw how many rehearsals I was doing."

I believed him. Mostly. Enough to let it go for now, at least.

"Tea or coffee?" Lego was already moving, gravitating toward the kitchen with the restless energy of someone who felt better when they were doing something. "I have the good tea, the one you liked last time. Or I just bought a new coffee—it's supposed to taste like caramel but I think they lied."

"Tea is good."

"Tea it is!"

He bustled around the kitchen, gathering cups and leaves and hot water, while I settled onto my usual spot on the couch. The coffee table in front of me was covered, as always, with an array of baked goods—heart-shaped cookies and star-shaped cookies and muffins that had been decorated with faces using what appeared to be chocolate chips and icing.

"These are new." I said, picking up a muffin.

"Made them this morning! Couldn't sleep, so I baked instead." Lego appeared with two cups, setting them on the table and curling up on the other end of the couch.

"Actually. I ran out of one ingredient and substituted something else. Adventure flavor."

"Adventure flavor."

"Only way to live."

I bit into an adventure muffin. It tasted like... maybe lemon? With something else, something unexpected but not unpleasant. "This is actually good."

"Told you. Adventure is always the right choice."

We settled into the comfortable silence of people who didn't need to fill every moment with words. The tea was warm in my hands, floral and sweet—definitely the one I'd liked before. Lego had remembered. He always remembered things like that, the small preferences and passing comments that most people forgot.

"I'll wrap some up for you," he said after a moment, gesturing at the cookies. "For Kavin. And your sister, if she wants them."

"Kavin will be thrilled. He talks about your cookies constantly. I'm pretty sure he thinks you're magic."

"I am magic. Obviously." Lego attempted a mysterious expression but ruined it by giggling. "Okay, I'm not magic. But I do make really good cookies, and that's basically the same thing."

He looked better now—still tired, still carrying something underneath the brightness, but the tears had dried and the smile was more genuine than performance. The crying had helped, maybe. Getting it out instead of carrying it around. But I was still going to text Tui. Just to make sure someone was checking on him. Someone who could be here more consistently, who could do more than visit occasionally with sketchbooks and good intentions.

I pulled out my phone while Lego was distracted with rearranging the cookies, and typed quickly:

At Lego's. He was crying when I got here. Said he's tired. Thought you should know.

The response came before I could even put my phone away:

Tui: On my way.

I smiled. Tui, finally showing up. Finally being the person Lego needed him to be.

"What are you smiling at?" Lego asked, suspicion coloring his voice.

"Nothing."

"That's a very specific smile for 'nothing.'"

"It's just a text. From Nut."

A small lie, but a useful one. Lego's face softened into knowing amusement instead of the anger that might come from knowing I'd tattled on him.

"You two are disgusting," he said, but his voice was warm. "Constantly texting. Making each other smile. Being all in love and whatever."

"We're not—it's new. We're figuring it out."

"Uh-huh. You're figuring out how to be disgustingly cute together. I see how it is."

I didn't argue. Didn't want to, really. The teasing was comfortable, familiar—the kind of thing friends did when they were happy for each other and didn't quite know how to say it sincerely.

"Show me the box." I said, changing the subject.

Lego's expression flickered—something complicated passing across his face before settling into careful neutrality. "Right. The box."

He reached for the cardboard container, pulling it closer, and opened the flaps to reveal what was inside.

A birthday card, elaborate and expensive-looking, the kind with actual texture and probably real gold foil. An envelope tucked next to it—money, probably, or a gift card. A very nicely wrapped black bag that practically screamed "designer." And beside it all, nestled in tissue paper, a white plush rabbit with enormous eyes and a pink ribbon tied between its ears.

Lego picked up the card first, opened it, and read aloud in a flat voice: "'Happy birthday, son. Thinking of you. Dad.'"

The words hung in the air, carrying more weight than their simplicity suggested.

"Your birthday's coming up?" I asked, surprised. "You didn't say anything."

Lego shrugged, setting the card aside. "It's in two days. But we've all been so busy—you with the exhibition, me with the showcase, everyone with everything. It didn't seem important to bring up."

"Your birthday is important."

"Is it?" The question came out more vulnerable than he probably intended. He picked up the rabbit, turning it over in his hands, studying its blank, adorable face. "My parents think they can just... mail presents. Like that makes up for not calling. Not visiting. Not actually being here."

I didn't have a response to that. Didn't know how to address the particular pain of parents who showed love through purchases rather than presence.

"The rabbit's cute, though," Lego continued, his voice deliberately lighter. "I'll name it... hmm. Something optimistic. Hope. No—Future. No, that's weird."

"You could add it to Mr. Whiskers' family."

"Maybe." He smiled at the rabbit, something sad and soft in his expression. "Maybe it can be Mr. Whiskers' cousin. Mrs. Ribbons. Distant relative, visiting from abroad."

He took out his phone and snapped a picture—the card, the bag, the rabbit arranged artfully together. Documenting the moment, even though the moment hurt.

"It's cute. He always sends something cute. Like he remembers that I used to like stuffed animals when I was little and hasn't noticed that I'm not little anymore."

There was no bitterness in his voice—just a kind of tired acceptance. The particular resignation of someone who had learned not to expect more than they got.

"Are you going to see him? For your birthday?"

"No." Lego set the rabbit down gently among its plush siblings on the couch. "He's busy. He's always busy. And his new family—" He stopped, took a breath. "It's fine. Birthdays aren't that important anyway."

"Birthdays are extremely important."

"They're just days."

"They're your days. The whole point is that someone decided the world was better because you exist, and once a year we acknowledge that they were right."

Lego looked at me, something unreadable in his expression. Then he smiled—small but real.

"That's... unexpectedly poetic of you, P'Hong."

"I have my moments."

Lego set the box aside, reached for his tea with both hands like he was trying to warm something that had gone cold inside.

"Anyway," he said, that determined brightness reasserting itself. "Enough sad stuff. I have to get ready for work, and you can be my audience while I do my makeup. Tell me about your paintings. Tell me about Nut. Tell me everything."

What followed was one of the most unexpectedly entertaining hours of my week.

Lego had set up a mirror on the coffee table and arranged his makeup like a ritual—brushes and palettes and mysterious tubes that probably cost more than my monthly grocery budget. Behind him, music played from a small speaker, something soft and melodic that I didn't recognize but found myself listening to anyway.

In the blinding darkness

Of the night it seems simple

All I know is that I love you here right now

"This song," I said. "What is it?"

"No idea. Some playlist Spotify made for me. It's been stuck in my head all week, The lyrics are beautiful."

He started applying primer, or foundation, or whatever the first step was—I'd never learned the terminology despite growing up with a sister who definitely knew these things. I watched, oddly fascinated, as his face transformed in subtle ways. Not dramatically different. Just... enhanced. Like someone had increased the contrast on a photograph.

It's not as if I wanted

To fall so hard for you or even understand

These woken feelings

"The paintings," Lego prompted, his eyes still on the mirror. "Tell me about the names you came up with."

So I told him. About sitting in the empty studio. About the words finally coming after months of silence. About "Almost" and "Fortress" and "The Real Me"—the titles I'd claimed, the descriptions I'd written, the pieces of myself I'd finally been willing to show. Lego listened without interrupting, nodding along as he applied eyeshadow in shades of gold and bronze. When I finished, he set down his brush and turned to face me properly.

"Those are perfect," he said. "The names. They're exactly right."

"You think so?"

"Hong." His voice was serious in a way it rarely was. "You spent months trying to name those paintings because you weren't ready to admit what they were about. And now you have, and the names are beautiful, and I'm really, really proud of you."

The sincerity caught me off guard. I looked away, embarrassed by the sudden tightness in my throat.

I love you in my own way, I love you better

I love you inside all this

I love you forever

"Okay, enough feelings," Lego said, clearly sensing my discomfort. "Now tell me about Nut. Is he still being perfect? Is he still texting you cute things? Are you still being disgustingly happy?"

"I don't know if 'disgustingly happy' is accurate—"

"It is. I can tell from your face. You get this specific look when you're thinking about him. Kind of soft."

"I do not."

"You absolutely do. You're doing it right now."

I refused to acknowledge this, focusing instead on a muffin that suddenly required my complete attention.

Lego laughed and returned to his makeup, adding liner that made his eyes look bigger, mascara that made his lashes look longer. The transformation was subtle but cumulative—by the time he was done, he looked like a slightly more polished version of himself. Like someone who was ready to be seen.

All these words are useless

When I look into your eyes

It's the simple truth of perfect

Little secrets

"Now," he announced, standing up with the energy of someone who had just finished an important project. "Time for the outfit."

He disappeared into his bedroom and emerged a few minutes later wearing something that made me momentarily forget how to process visual information. A tight black crop top that ended just below his ribs. A skirt with shorts underneath, the fabric flowing when he moved. Tall black boots that added inches to his already slight frame. The whole ensemble was simultaneously casual and dramatic—the kind of outfit that would look absolutely ridiculous on most people but somehow looked exactly right on Lego.

"For the flower shop?" I asked, genuinely confused. "You're wearing that to arrange bouquets?"

"I like to look nice. Makes me feel more like myself." He did a small spin, the skirt flaring out around him. "How do I look?"

"Like you're about to walk a runway or fight someone. Possibly both."

"Perfect. That's exactly the vibe I was going for."

He was smiling now—genuinely smiling, the kind of expression that reached his eyes and pushed out the tiredness he'd been carrying earlier. There was something about getting dressed up that seemed to energize him, like the clothes themselves were a form of armor or transformation.

I thought about my own relationship with fashion—the safe choices, the muted colors, the tendency to blend rather than stand out. I'd always wanted to be more daring with my style, but I'd been too shy. Too worried about what people might think. Too convinced that I didn't have the right body or the right confidence or the right something to pull off anything interesting. But looking at Lego now, in his crop top and boots and complete self-assurance, I thought maybe confidence wasn't something you had to be born with. Maybe it was something you practiced. Something you decided.

"Wait," I said, reaching for my phone. "Stay there."

"What? Why?"

"I want to take pictures."

Lego's eyes went wide, and he immediately tried to cover the camera lens with his hand. "No no no, I'm not ready, my hair is still—"

"Your hair is fine. You look amazing. Just—let me document this."

"Document this?" He was laughing now, still trying to dodge the camera, still protesting. "What are you documenting?"

"You. Being you. Looking incredible."

Something in my voice must have been convincing, because he stopped protesting. His expression shifted from embarrassed to curious to something that looked almost shy.

"Okay," he said quietly. "Okay, fine. But only because you used your serious voice."

You're the only thing I'm sure of

And it makes it all so hard

All the other things are broken out of focus

I raised my phone and started shooting. Lego, standing in his living room, surrounded by stuffed animals and sunlight. Lego, laughing as he tried to figure out what to do with his hands. Lego, finally relaxing into it, finding poses that looked natural rather than forced. He was beautiful. Not in the conventional way—not in the way that advertising or Instagram or society at large defined beauty. But in the way that mattered. In the way that came from being completely, unapologetically yourself.

"Okay, let me see." he demanded after a few minutes, reaching for the phone. I handed it over and watched his face as he scrolled through the photos.

"These are..." He trailed off, something vulnerable flickering across his features. "Hong, these are really good."

"I know."

"I look..."

"Like yourself. Like someone who's figured out how to exist in their own skin."

Lego looked up at me, and for a moment there were tears in his eyes again—but different tears. The kind that came from being seen rather than from being hurt.

"Thank you." he said simply.

"For the photos?"

"For everything. For coming over. For letting me cry on you. For not treating me like I'm fragile just because I'm tired." He set the phone down and hugged me again, briefly this time. "You're a really good friend, Hong. I hope you know that."

"I'm learning."

The morning slipped away from us, the way good mornings always do. We talked about the exhibition and the showcase and all the complicated feelings that came with putting yourself on display for strangers to judge. We ate too many cookies and drank too much tea. We scrolled through the photos I'd taken and picked favorites to send to the group chat that had somehow become the center of all our social organizing.

When I finally checked the time, I realized I needed to leave soon for my afternoon class. The realization brought with it the particular regret of having to end something good.

"Wait," Lego said, jumping up from the couch. "Before you go. Sweets for your family."

He disappeared into the kitchen and emerged with a paper bag decorated with

hand-drawn flowers—because of course he had decorated paper bags, because of course everything in Lego's life was touched by care and intention.

"Cookies for Kavin. Muffins for your sister. And..." He reached into the bag and pulled out a small bundle wrapped in wax paper. "These are for you. Special recipe. Don't share them."

"What makes them special?"

"That's for me to know and you to taste. Consider it a preview for my birthday—if you're making me something, I'm giving you homework."

I laughed, tucking the bag into my backpack. "I'm not making you anything. You already have too many stuffed animals."

"There's no such thing as too many stuffed animals. That's like saying there's too much love. Impossible by definition."

We walked to the door together, and I was reaching for the handle when Lego suddenly grabbed my arm.

"Wait. One more thing." Before I could ask what, he hugged me again—longer this time, tight enough that I could feel the tension he was still carrying in his shoulders. "Thank you for texting Tui," he said against my shoulder. "I know you did. That's why you were smiling earlier."

"I—"

"It's okay. I'm not mad. I'm..." He pulled back, and his expression was complicated. "I'm glad someone told him. I wanted to tell him myself but I didn't want to be a burden. And now he's coming, and I don't have to pretend I'm okay when I'm not."

"You're never a burden, Lego."

"I know. I'm learning that too." He smiled, a real smile, the kind that made his eyes crinkle at the corners. "We're all learning, right? That's the whole point."

I nodded, and opened the door—And Tui was there, standing in the hallway, looking like he'd run the entire way from the studio. "Lego," he said, slightly out of breath. "Are you—"

He didn't finish the sentence before Lego launched himself forward, wrapping his arms around Tui's neck, and Tui caught him without hesitation, holding on like someone who had finally stopped pretending he didn't want to. I stepped past them into the hallway, and Lego pulled back long enough to shoot me a look that was probably meant to be angry but just looked like a kitten trying to be intimidating.

"You told him I was crying," he accused.

"I did."

"You're the worst."

"I really am."

But he was smiling, and Tui was smiling, and there was something in the air between them that felt like progress. Like the beginning of something that had been waiting for a long time to begin.

The door closed behind me, and I stood in the hallway for a moment, just breathing.

Not perfect—never perfect—but present. Showing up for each other. Telling someone when their person needed them. Building something out of the thousand small moments that added up to love.

I walked to the elevator, descended to the street, and started toward the university. The paper bag of sweets was heavy in my backpack. The photos of Lego were saved on my phone. And in my chest, that warm feeling that had started with Kevin's dinosaur-cloud and continued through breakfast and bus rides and tears and cookies and an outfit that looked ready for a runway—that feeling was still there. Growing, maybe. Spreading into all the spaces that used to be empty.

I had a class to get to. An exhibition to survive. A relationship to figure out. A whole life to navigate, with all its complications and uncertainties and unexpected joys. But right now, walking through Bangkok in the late morning sunlight, I was just happy.

Simple as that.

Happy.

The kind of happy that didn't need explanations or justifications or caveats. The kind that existed for its own sake, because the world was beautiful and the people in it were good and I had finally, finally learned how to notice.

My phone buzzed. Nut, again:

How's your morning going?

I typed back without hesitation:

Perfect. Absolutely perfect.

And I meant it.

The university gates appeared ahead of me.

I had classes to attend. Notes to take. The ordinary business of education, the

mundane structure of a day. But underneath that ordinariness, something was different now.

I was different.

Not fixed—I didn't believe in "fixed" anymore. But changing. Growing. Unfurling like those resurrection plants that Est had on his windowsill, finally getting the water I needed to turn green again. I pushed through the gates and headed toward my building.

Ten days until the exhibition.

Two days until Lego's birthday.

A lifetime of moments still ahead, waiting to be lived.